

## Veterans and Their Families Deserve Justice and Honesty

Written by Mike Honda  
Thursday, 09 November 2006 19:00

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In order to fully honor America's fighting men and women, however, it is incumbent upon us to recognize all of our combatants, particularly those for whom justice and equity remain illusory.

These include San Jose native and professional football phenomenon Patrick Tillman, the Army corporal whose suspicious death in combat remains unanswered, and legions of Filipino soldiers whose vital contributions to America's World War II victory over Japan have gone unrecognized for over 60 years.

Tillman gave up a stellar professional football career to volunteer in our defense, along with his brother, Kevin, after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on our homeland. During a 2004 battle in Afghanistan, he was felled by ``friendly fire."

Despite multiple, protracted and -- by its own admission -- highly flawed investigations, the Department of Defense has failed to appropriately account for the events surrounding Tillman's death. Nor has the Pentagon substantively addressed subsequent misstatements to his family and the media that, either by omission or commission, have further cloaked this tragedy in a veil of mystery and confusion.

The Defense Department has set December as the final deadline for release of the definitive report on this matter. In honor of a hero's legacy, to provide closure for his mourning family and to secure the trust of current and future service members in their commanders, it is vital that America pay its long overdue debt to Tillman.

Should the forthcoming investigation prove as defective as previous ones, however, an official congressional investigation would not be unwarranted.

In 1934, Congress passed legislation requiring the Army of the Philippines, then an American commonwealth, to answer a mobilization order by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Included in this order was a promise of veterans' benefits.

During World War II, more than 200,000 Filipino soldiers served alongside U.S. troops, fighting -- and dying -- at crucial battles such as Corregidor and Bataan, making vital contributions to the defeat of Japan.

After the Allied victory, thousands more Filipino soldiers were called to help re-establish U.S. authority in the Pacific. The American government again vowed that all Filipino soldiers who fought under the Stars and Stripes would be treated as American veterans with full benefits. In 1946, in one of its least decorous acts, Congress rescinded this promise. Of the troops from 66 countries recognized for their military service under the U.S. flag, Filipino soldiers are the only group yet to be fully recognized.

To right this wrong, and in my capacity as chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, I have co-sponsored the Filipino Veterans Equity Act of 2006. This bill would amend

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the 1946 Rescission Act to recognize Filipino soldiers as full U.S. veterans, making this aging population eligible for U.S. veterans' benefits, including access to quality medical care at Veterans Affairs facilities.

Tomorrow will mark the 88th occasion since the conclusion of World War I that Americans have paused to pay homage to those who have risked and sacrificed beyond measure for our lives, liberty and happiness. For those who have served, there is simply no excuse for a single one of these heroes -- be he or she from San Jose or Manila -- to fade into obscurity. For those currently in harm's way, we must ensure that the sacrifices they make are repaid by providing them with the best equipment, such as body armor, that the most advanced military in the world can provide.

On the field of battle, our troops pledge to ``leave no one behind." The very least we can do is fulfill this vow on the home front -- to each and every one them.